

Wander

Sitting on a pale pink furry pouf by her open window, lighting a stick of incense, Margie sighed. She hadn't had a day off in two weeks, and it was nicer than she'd imagined to relax in the warm, early summer evening. The sun wouldn't set for another hour or so, which meant she would be able to read by its light until it was time to put together some dinner.

As she placed the stick of incense in the coiled tail of her serpent-shaped burner, a flake of ash fell into the snake's open mouth. She tucked a strand of wavy, strawberry blond hair behind her ear and centered the burner on the windowsill. As she did, movement on the sidewalk far below caught her eye. A tiny creature rustled into the brush at the forest's edge, making Margie squint. It looked halfway like a cat, but she couldn't be positive. She was sure, however, that it was the same creature she'd seen cross her path several days before. Its quickness and odd gait had startled her into dropping her coffee all over the sidewalk and herself; in the panic of that moment, she hadn't been able to get a very good look at it, but something about its shape and rough skin had unnerved her. She had wondered if, perhaps, it was injured.

Without hesitating, Margie leapt up from her seat, studying the spot in the underbrush where the creature had escaped her view. In moments she was skipping down the back steps of her apartment building, two at a time, tossing furtive glances at the forest's edge. Once she reached the spot she felt looked right, she pushed her way past the verge and stopped short. The animal's path was marked for her, with spots of sticky crimson coating the ferns; just ahead, she noticed the amber glint of eyes, and she stared back at the creature, which seemed to be holding its breath just like her. Then, it blinked, and was gone.

With a last glance back at her building, Margie pushed into the underbrush. Now that she knew the creature was injured, she was determined to see if she could help it. She hated the thought of a poor hurt cat out in the forest all alone.

Inside the trees, the last light of the day was dim, shaded by the thick canopy above. The sounds of town faded as she followed the trail of blood drops deeper into the brush. Soon, the only sounds around her were the leaves rustling in the breeze above and the crunch of debris under her boots. She breathed deeply, smiling to herself. These woods reminded her of home, of the woods she used to play in as a child. There had been a stream, and lots of big, old trees. These trees, too, boasted long lives.

Margie began to wonder if the creature had gone a different way as the drops grew fewer and farther between, and a spark of fear rose inside her when she thought of the sun going down before she found it. Homey or not, she had seen too many shadows in these woods to feel safe in them after dark; the shadows loomed at her when she walked home from work late at night, called to her window on the third floor, threatened to part from the darkness of the woods and climb to consume her. The last thing she wanted was to end up surrounded by them, with nothing but the flashlight on her phone to find her way home.

Margie glanced around, wondering if she even remembered the way back. She hadn't expected to walk so far into the woods; the few times she had even been inside them, she hadn't been alone, and she had never wandered far enough to lose sight of the sidewalk. She stopped walking, turning in a circle. The woods back home had never led her astray; surely, these wouldn't either.

Nothing looked familiar. She didn't even see any blood near where she was standing. No trampled plants, no footprints, only dead leaves and weeds poking through. She listened, trying to hear even the slightest sound from the road past her building, or people in the building with their stereos too loud. She heard nothing but the wind, and maybe a stream nearby. She grew tense.

There was a rustle to her left, and she spun around. *A bird?* she wondered. Indeed, a bird stomped out of the shrubbery, glancing at her with black beady eyes. He turned to scratch his midnight feathers, ignoring her presence, and she watched as he preened and pecked at the dead leaves on the ground.

"Birdy, can you show me the way home?" Margie asked softly, half-hoping the creature would nod and take her back to her apartment. Instead, he looked at her again, and flew away up into the trees abruptly, startling her.

Margie's nervousness was beginning to seep through her goosebump skin and settle in her bones. The sun was growing lower and the shadows of the trees were growing longer. She made her mind up quickly; she could do nothing to save this creature if she was lost in the woods. She needed to stop following it and find her way back.

Margie reached to pull her cell phone from her back pocket, only to realize that it wasn't there. She frantically checked her other pockets, coming up empty; the cold truth slapped her as she pictured it laying on the floor by her window, where it had been when she'd seen the creature

outside, and where she had left it when she had run downstairs, expecting to be back quickly. Panic caught her breath in her throat; she had hoped to use the phone's map to help point her way home, but now, she didn't even have the flashlight to guide her from the darkness. And it was closing over her head as the sun began to slip below the horizon.

Margie stumbled forward and leaned against a tree. *You're an adult*, she told herself. *You are not afraid of the dark, or the woods, or being lost. Your apartment is probably no more than a fifteen minute walk away. You just need to figure out which way to go.* She looked around again, trying to ground herself, taking deep breaths of the air rich with rot from the leaves beneath her feet.

Choosing a direction that seemed hopeful to her distressed mind, Margie pulled herself forward through the underbrush. Briars tugged on her leggings, begging her to stay. She let them scratch her and rip tiny holes rather than stopping to carefully tug them free. Soon, she came upon a tree with a giant knot in it, a knot she was sure she had seen coming into the woods. She sighed a breath of relief; she'd found the way out.

Margie pushed past the knotted tree and stumbled as her foot caught on a root. She fell forward, her hands and knees colliding with the dead leaves. Dampness seeped into her clothes and clung to her when she pulled herself back to her feet. She wiped her hands on her shirt and took a deep breath. *Watch where you're stepping, dummy.*

She plunged forward, her eyes searching the darkening forest ahead for signs of her building beyond them. She found none, only leaves and branches. The wind was growing stronger overhead, and she could hear it thrusting through the trees menacingly. Her hands grew sore and scraped as she pulled herself along by the rough bark on the trees she passed. Any calm that she had brought herself before was dwindling fast, and all thoughts of helping the cat creature had flown from her mind. Margie was praying for streetlights when she looked up and her heart dropped into the dirty leaves at her feet.

Before her stood a knotted tree; *the* knotted tree. She shook her head, certain that she had been walking in a straight line away from this tree. But no- she could see the disruption in the leaves where she had fallen and the root that had caught her foot. Margie froze, unable to take another step as the truth of her situation sunk in: she would not get out of these trees before the sun was completely gone. She had mere minutes left with its light, and she was trapped.

Margie finally shook her head and rushed forward, careful not to fall again. She crashed through the woods, hoping her haste and noise would scare off the shadows. She felt herself panicking more and more, and with each step she grew more frantic, until she broke into a run, barreling through the thorns that tore at her skin into the darkness ahead, tiny sobs beginning to echo from the base of her throat.

Margie ran until her breath was gone, and she was crying heavily. She fell against a tree and sobbed, the last of the daylight fading away and leaving her in darkness. The moon was slim, providing very little visibility for her beneath the canopy of leaves. Margie could hardly see, anyway, as the tears bubbled forth from her eyes.

She let herself curl into a sitting position on the ground, trying to take deep breaths and regain some small composure. She was tired, hungry, terrified, and alone in the woods, and if she could not crawl out of this predicament, she felt she was going to be stuck in it indefinitely. She didn't know how much panic she could handle in one night if she had to spend it stumbling around the forest.

As Margie sat, slowing her breathing, she began to notice the smells of the forest again. The rotting leaves, soaking into the seat of her pants, the gritty wood of the tree on her back, the dampness of the dirt. And something else, a growing smell, of something putrid, decaying. She realized the smell and gagged slightly as she breathed it in. She hesitantly pulled herself to her feet, stumbling towards the smell to find what had died.

Before her lay the creature, bloody, scaly, slightly furred, and completely grotesque. She was certain of two things: this was not a cat. And there was nothing she could have done to save it, even if she hadn't gotten lost.

She hoped her chances were better.

Margie hurried away from the corpse, a newfound motivation driving her feet. Within minutes, she caught sight of the floodlights lining the sidewalk behind her building. Her feet connected with the concrete hard, her boots slamming into it like a landing pad. A hysterical laugh choked out of her as she stumbled up the steps to her apartment; inside, she was relieved that her roommates were closed away in their room. She hastened to her bedroom and closed the door, crossed to the window and slammed it shut, and drew both the curtains and the blinds to block the view of the shadows in the forest. They called out for her to return. Her arms and legs were lined with red from the thorns. She stripped off her wet clothes and pulled a blanket around

her shoulders. Then she sank to the floor of her room, her arms hugging her knees, and her eyes staring blankly ahead.